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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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## **NEW PLEDGE PROGRAM ASKS PREGNANT MOMS TO QUIT SMOKING**

*Partner organizations join forces to raise awareness of the risks of smoking during pregnancy and help expectant mothers quit tobacco*

**Sacramento** – In an average week in California, more than 970 babies arrive prematurely. Babies born prematurely can have long-term medical problems and disabilities. Prematurity is also the leading cause of death in the first month of life.

In an effort to raise awareness of the risk of premature births due to smoking during pregnancy, First 5 California, the California Smokers' Helpline, WIC (Women, Infants, and Children) and the March of Dimes today announced a new program to encourage expectant and new mothers to pledge to quit smoking. The pledge program is part of the March of Dimes Prematurity Awareness Campaign, which marks Tuesday, November 16, as Prematurity Awareness Day.

"Tobacco use among pregnant women is the leading preventable cause of infant mortality. It's estimated that nearly 10 percent of pregnant women in California smoke during their pregnancy, ranking California one of the worst in the nation," said Jane Henderson, Executive Director of First 5 California. "Our goal is to lower the risk of preterm births by helping expectant mothers stop using tobacco."

Distributed statewide through local WIC agencies, the pledge program offers new and expectant mothers information about the risks associated with tobacco use during pregnancy and secondhand smoke exposure to young children. Asking women to "become a role model for your children", the pledge cards also promote the California Smokers' Helpline, a statewide, free smoking "quitline." The Helpline offers free services, provided over the telephone, to help smokers quit through self-help materials, a local tobacco cessation resource listing and counseling over the phone. The Helpline is available to all smokers in California, with specialized services available for pregnant women. The statewide, toll-free Helpline phone number is 1-800-NO-BUTTS. Services are available in six languages, including English, Spanish, Cantonese, Mandarin, Korean and Vietnamese.

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“A Helpline study shows that telephone counseling increases the chance by more than 50 percent that smokers will successfully quit during their pregnancy,” said Dr. Shu-Hong Zhu, Director of the California Smokers’ Helpline, Associate Professor, School of Medicine, University of California, San Diego. “We want to raise awareness and help expectant moms quit smoking—for their health and the health of their unborn child.”

Expectant mothers who smoke while pregnant put their babies at risk for complications including premature birth, low birthweight and death. Premature and low birthweight babies are not yet fully developed and are more likely to face serious health problems, including mental retardation, cerebral palsy, lung and gastrointestinal problems, and vision and hearing loss. Each year, neonatal health care costs attributable to maternal smoking total approximately \$336 million in the United States. Smoking-cessation programs continue to be a crucial strategy for preventing poor birth outcomes and decreasing the social and financial costs of smoking during pregnancy.

“When a woman smokes during pregnancy, her baby gets less oxygen, causing the baby to grow more slowly and gain less weight in the womb,” said Dr. Leonard Klay, M.D., Obstetrician and Gynecologist and March of Dimes representative. “Smoking nearly doubles a woman’s risk of having a low birthweight baby. We hope the pledge program encourages women who smoke to consider these risks and make the decision to quit.”

Mothers, fathers and caregivers who continue to smoke after their baby is born put their children at risk for respiratory illness, Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS), middle ear infection, impaired lung function, asthma, pneumonia and bronchitis. The developing lungs of young children are severely affected by exposure to secondhand smoke because children are still developing physically, have higher breathing rates than adults and have little control over their indoor environments.

Please visit the following Web sites for more information about the partner organizations involved in the pledge program to raise awareness about smoking and the risks associated with prematurity:

- First 5 California: [www.ccfc.ca.gov](http://www.ccfc.ca.gov)
- The California Smokers’ Helpline: [www.californiasmokershelpline.org](http://www.californiasmokershelpline.org)
- California Women, Infants, and Children (WIC): [www.WICworks.ca.gov](http://www.WICworks.ca.gov)
- March of Dimes Prematurity Awareness Campaign: [www.clicktosavebabies.org](http://www.clicktosavebabies.org)